



**TESTIMONY ON SB 123 – Sen. Carol Williams
House Education Committee
March 21, 2007**

Chairman Jore and members of the committee, for the record, I am Pete Carparelli,
Executive Director of the Montana Quality Education Coalition.

I appear on behalf of MQEC and as a proponent of SB 123 sponsored by Senator Williams.

As you know, the goal of the Montana Quality Education Coalition is adequate stable on-going funding for quality public K–12 education as defined in 20-9-309 MCA passed by the Montana Legislature in 2005 and as assured by the Montana Constitution. MQEC has been evaluating legislation proposed during the 2007 Legislature, and has supported such legislation that adequately addresses one or more of the requirements of 20-9-309 MCA and meets the state's constitutional obligation to adequately fund our public K–12 school system. MQEC has also provided testimony and other information to assist the Legislative and Executive branches their considerations of proposed legislation dealing with Montana's public elementary and secondary schools. Most notably, MQEC has provided Estimating the Cost of an Adequate Education in Montana for your consideration during your deliberations.

MQEC honors the Court's recognition of the state's right to phase in any remedy over time, and MQEC will support legislation as part of a phase-in remedy that explicitly prescribes a cost-based approach and leads to a defined funding goal over a specified period of time.

MQEC will oppose legislation that is not consistent with 20-9-309 MCA and the Court's decision.

Today, MQEC supports passage of SB 123, "An Act Providing Full -Time Funding to Public School Districts for Students Enrolled in A Full-Time Kindergarten Program....." because it has determined that the bill addresses more than one of the tests of adequate funding and/or quality education. MQEC supports the bill, however, with concern for certain tests of adequacy which remain unmet in other related statute, and which I will mention in my testimony. MQEC also supports passage of SB 123 because it is good public policy and good education – good for kids.

First and foremost, full-time kindergarten is good education. As you have already heard, the significant short and long-term benefits of full-time kindergarten are well documented in the literature of the Economics, Sociology and Education professions. I can tell you as a parent, grandparent, and former educator that I have directly observed the efficacy of kindergarten in children's learning and living – in school and beyond.

Second, MQEC believes that funding such sound best-practice as full-time kindergarten can be presented as a component of quality education that proactively addresses the problems of at-risk, gifted and talented, and other special needs populations as well as the challenge to eliminate the achievement gap evident amongst American Indian Children and children within the special needs population. It also sets a strong foundation for all students as they and we strive for a world-class competitive education and work force. Therefore, the full ANB funding of full-time kindergarten addresses some of the promises of the Montana Constitution and legislative intent as codified in 20-9-309, as well as more than one of the directives of the Courts. Passage of SB 123 would, thus, be good law.

When you consider that about 25% of kindergarten students across this state now attend full-time kindergarten, but with only one-half ANB supporting each child, you can see that as SB 123 brings the opportunity to 80% of eligible children, the State may be in a better position as far as equity of opportunity and funding is concerned.

SB 123 partially addresses the requirement that adequate funding of quality public K-12 schools be cost-based in that it does provide full-time ANB for full-time kindergarten students, as opposed to current law that provides only half of the funding for students attending full-time kindergarten. SB 123 also provides a means to adjust the general fund budget limitations for districts choosing to offer full-time kindergarten. To that extent, it would be good law. MQEC expresses strong concern, however, that unless adequate state funding is provided to cover startup costs, the State would not be meeting its obligation to provide cost-based funding for full-time kindergarten. Without the startup funds, the goodness of the law is weakened.

Additionally, MQEC asserts the position that the discrepancy between elementary ANB and secondary ANB is not cost-based, therefore not based on educationally relevant factors, and does not adequately reflect the cost of delivering quality education at the elementary level. Elementary ANB under current law, therefore, may not reflect the cost of delivering a kindergarten program. We recognize, however, that it is not proper to address changes to this element of the funding formula in a bill providing for full ANB funding for full-time kindergarten, but we feel obligated to point out that this flaw in the basic foundation of school funding, as provided elsewhere in statute impacts the Legislature's ability to address the Court's directive and the Legislature's own codification of law that adequate funding must be based on the cost of educationally relevant factors.

Another cost-based factor that will impact the ability of schools to adequately fund full-time kindergarten programs in the future is the need for self-executing inflationary adjustments. Again, we recognize that this is not properly addressed by the bill before you today, but we feel obligated to again point out a factor that impacts adequate funding at the elementary level of the school system.

SB 123 provides for a local option, making it good public policy and good law at the same time. As good law, it recognizes the statutorily established factor of local control of publicly funded schools. Locally elected school trustees may judge that in their particular

situation they will provide enhanced early childhood education, or these locally elected trustees may choose, for whatever reason, to retain a more limited program. If the local citizenry disagrees with either approach, it could make its wishes known, and even exercise its democratic franchise to make a change in local policy and/or school governance. Local control is good law and good public policy.

Chairman Jore and members of the committee, MQEC suggests to you that although SB 123 does not in and of itself comprise adequate funding of free quality public K-12 schools, along with cost corrections addressed elsewhere, it is a good step forward to that goal. We urge your consideration of passage of this bill. And once again, we strongly urge this committee and the Legislative body as a whole to embark on a collaborative effort to bring adequate funding forth from this 60th Legislative Assembly and to preclude the need to continued litigation on the matter of adequate funding for public K-12 schools in Montana.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon. Thank you, Senator Williams for bringing SB 123 to the Legislature.